

A D D R E S S

CITIZENS AND INHABITANTS OF EDINBURGH,

UPON THE

CONSTITUTION OF THE BOROUGH

**C**ANDOUR and moderation should ever characterise the writings of him who addresses the public. It is his duty to state facts with impartiality, and to treat his adversaries with decency and respect. I trust that I shall transgress neither of these maxims, since it is my intention to offer my opinion upon a subject which regards the future and permanent prosperity of the town, and the general welfare of the nation.

It has afforded matter of wonder to the spectators of a late canvass, to behold the majority of the merchant counsellors continue their adherence to the interest of Sir Laurence Dundas, while the incorporated trades of the city unanimously concurred in opposing him. The different incorporations have published advertisements declaring that they were, in this opposition, animated solely with the laudable and disinterested motive of securing the independence of their native city.

But, were we to suppose these professions sincere, I can perceive nothing in the private character of the individuals who compose the merchant council, which should render them more averse to contend for independence. Many of them are gentlemen who have enjoyed the advantage of a liberal education, from which they should have imbibed the principles of virtue, and have learned, that, to bring the town under the subjection of any person whatever,

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was the most dreadful misfortune which could befall virtuous magistrates. I do not suppose one of them capable of so base and so deliberate a piece of treachery. And, if they now labour under the suspicion of remissness for not having sufficiently withstood the solicitations of their patron, it is but candid to impute this facility of temper to some peculiarity of the station in which they are obliged to act, and not to any inherent defect in the characters of the men. How far this is the case, I shall next proceed to consider.

By the set of the town, the vacancies of the town-council are filled up in the most extraordinary manner. The merchant counsellors, who compose the majority of the council, are vested with the exclusive right of electing their own successors in office. Neither the Merchant Company, nor the great body of the citizens, are permitted to give a single vote in the choice of their magistrates. Thus the town-council is chosen, not only without the consent of their fellow citizens, but often in direct opposition to the inclination of the majority. After their election, the magistrates are placed in a situation in which they are freed from the controul of those very people with the management of whose affairs they are entrusted. No retrospective view into their administration can ever afterwards take place. The inhabitants have no title to displace them for their misbehaviour, however much they may have reason be dissatisfied with their conduct. They cannot even prevent their future re-election after the legal time of their service is elapsed.

I confess it does not appear to me that this exemption from the censure of their fellow citizens promises to ensure a more conscientious discharge of their trust: For many a man acts with vigilance and industry when he has the prospect of no review before his superiors, who would act with less circumspection, were every restraint removed.

But, besides this immunity from retrospection, the absurd constitution of the town-council is attended with numberless other disadvantages. To mention a few of those: It is well known that every man looks with partiality on those from whom he has received favours. The former counsellors were the patrons of the present set. To their patronage they owe their promotion. And will not gratitude naturally prompt them to reward their benefactors?

But, independent of such disinterested principles, other motives concur which have commonly more influence in moving the generality of mankind. A merchant counsellor is a man of no small importance in his own conceit. It is in his power to do good offices



to his friends. He is a person of some public note, and has to act in that elevated station from which pride allows but few people to descend without regret. Will it then seem strange, if he should desire to continue in possession of his new dignity? This is the common frailty of all men; and, unfortunately for us, the present set of the town affords him but too certain means of accomplishing his purpose. For, so long as the mode of electing merchant counsellors continues circumscribed within its present narrow boundaries, he has only to enter into a combination with the rest of his brethren, to admit friends, exclude enemies, and lay down a set train of measures to be invariably pursued by all of them. Thus is a confederacy formed, which may govern the town with uncontrollable sway, and continue their power so long as they remain united. And what chance is there that it shall be speedily dissolved? Consider but the progress of the admission of a counsellor into office, and then judge how far it is calculated to make him an independent and a patriotic magistrate. The first step of his advancement necessarily is to conciliate the good graces of his predecessors. And how is this, in general, to be won, but by the promise of an obsequious submission to their commands? The office lies entirely at their disposal; and, unless the candidate agree to enter into such terms as they are pleased to prescribe him, he can never expect to have the support of their patronage, and must, without it, submit to the mortification of a repulse. Under such circumstances, and with an object of ambition in view, a man of honest principles may unwarily pledge his faith to concur with the designs of a faction, and he may occasionally think himself bound in honour to support the interest of their party, though it should even go against the dictates of his own conscience. Such declarations, I am told, have been made by some among the present counsellors, who expressed both their strong disapprobation of the measures carrying on, and their own regret at finding themselves entangled with engagements which they could not violate without exposing themselves to the reproach of having promised what they could not perform.

This appears to me to be a fair and simple detail of the inconveniencies which flow from the institution of a magistracy so totally unconnected with the great body of the citizens whom they govern. From this source we are to derive all the evils which harass us. Discontents would never prevail, were the magistrates dependent for their places upon the favour of their fellow citizens. But, as matters now stand, we may be placed under the government of men: whom

whom we neither respect nor esteem. The magistrates may have lost our confidence for their imprudences. They may be despised for their imbecillity. They may even be at variance with us for having paid no regard to the voice of the majority. Yet, once they get into office, we cannot dislodge them, because they elect themselves.

It is not easy to conceive a more iniquitous exclusion of free citizens from their right of voting at the election of their magistrates, nor a discretionary power vested in a set of men which is more unfavourable to the virtue of those who exercise it.

There cannot be a more striking instance of the truth of this doctrine than what we may gather from the late transactions in town. The contrast between the behaviour of the deacons and that of the merchant counsellors, is singularly remarkable. The deacons have all along acted a most popular part. To say no worse of it, the conduct of the merchant counsellors has been just the reverse. How then did it happen that the probity of a set of men struggling for independence, and some among them not distinguished for their riches, should have been applauded by all people? The applause was bestowed upon them, because it was thought that they deserved it; and the reason of their upright conduct is most obvious. Their constituents chose them for their good opinion of their principles. They did not, like the merchant counsellors, elect themselves. It was not, therefore, in their power to enter into a confederacy to support the interest of each other, at the expence of the public welfare. Had it been in their option to perpetuate their own reign, they might have, like other men, fallen a sacrifice to the irresistible charms of self interest. But they are preserved from it by the reverence they entertained for the honour of their society. What a glorious triumph to independence was it to behold those worthy industrious men walking in the public street, and looking in the face of their fellow citizens, whose rights they had defended! What heart-felt satisfaction would they not experience from this consciousness of their own fidelity? In every countenance they met they might read a tacit approbation of the steadiness of their conduct, a testimony of merit far superior to the noisy compliments of flatterers. When they appeared before the boards of their respective corporations to give an account of their conduct, the joy there was reciprocal. The members were employed in voting their most hearty thanks to their deacon for the admirable steadiness of his conduct, while the deacon had, in his turn, to congratulate his brethren on the prosperous success of his



his commission. Such are the happy effects of rulers being named or deposed at the discretion of their constituents.

It is true that every upright man acts honourably from principle, and that even knaves do so, when it goes along with their own interest. But many men there are in the world of that dubious character, who, though not downrightly abandoned, can yet accommodate their behaviour to their interest, and still find a salvo for their conscience. Men of this stamp often go astray more from want of sufficient resolution to persevere in virtue, than from any real depravity of heart. They can fully discern the propriety of a virtuous conduct, once it is pointed out to them, and they will act accordingly when they are overawed by a sense of shame or the fear of punishment. For ignorance a deacon can pretend no excuse. The voice of the corporation always is his monitor. By adhering to it, he is certain of acting properly. Nor can he in council contradict what the corporation have resolved in private, and entirely avoid the imputation of treachery. He is the representative of the corporation, appointed on purpose to watch over their interest, to deliver their opinion in council, he is supposed to speak their voice, and not his own. Thus is both his duty, and the conduct which he ought in propriety to follow, manifestly pointed out to every deacon.

But, should the sense of duty alone not prove a sufficient motive to restrain the irregularity of his passion, he still farther foresees the displeasure of his brethren awaiting his imprudence. That man must, indeed, possess more than common effrontery, who can calmly meet the eyes of friends, whose indignation he has so justly provoked, by abusing their confidence. And what neither the sense of duty nor the feelings of shame will produce, the fear and certainty of punishment will most effectually accomplish. In the midst of his career, however much he may glory in the exercise of his delegated authority, he must often recollect, that the hour of reckoning will one day arrive, on which every wilful deviation from the true interest of his society will be stigmatized with contempt, censure, degradation, and with every other mark of disgrace which it is in the power of an incensed majority to inflict upon a disobedient deacon, in order to mortify his pride. Seasonable correction makes every man virtuous. What a pity it is, that magistrates and the merchant counsellors don't, in the same manner, owe their elevation to the suffrages of their fellow citizens! Were the great body of the people armed with a power of chastising their magistrates for any malversation in office, we should not then hear of impopular magistrates; because none such would

would, in that case, be elected. No discordance would ever subsist between them and their electors, whose favour it would be so much their interest to retain. The decisions of the Town Council would always be directed by the voice of a majority which they revered. Or, should it ever happen that the Provost and his counsellors thought it their duty to oppose the prejudices of a misguided populace, who were either deceived by appearances, or misled by impostures, they would then stand forth, with the firmness of men, in defence of the constitution of their country, and deliver their sentiments in the language of truth. In such a case, their conduct would be manly, open, and decisive. We should not then hear of a wealthy citizen skulking into the house of a great Baronet, there to cringe to his patron, and to feed his vanity with all the fulsome flattery of adulation. It may scarcely seem credible that this very man should, only a few months before, have publicly condemned the secession of a great Baronet from the support of government; shown in all companies the letters which he received from him; offered his own comments, not very favourable to their contents; read the answers which he had written, expostulating with great warmth and freedom upon the impropriety of his conduct; and that he should even declare, that he never would cooperate with any party to aid a man who deserved so ill of his fellow citizens. Yet, what do we now behold? This man is now again the leader of Sir Laurence's friends. In remonstrances great and mighty, and action fawning and irresolute. So sudden a conversion was not brought about by means which will ever be told the public. But, did every man stand solely upon the conscious rectitude of his conduct, he would then act openly in the face of all the world, and bid defiance to the calumnies of the censorious. His arguments would be clear, consistent, and persuasive. For, when what a man says proceeds from the internal conviction of his heart, he is readily understood: His language is concise and substantial. But, when we hear abstruse arguments employed upon plain subjects, and clothed in mysterious, equivocal, embarrassed expression; when the tales of the different partizans don't tally with each other; then we may safely venture to pronounce the whole to be only a specious covering to their own dissimulation. What but the consciousness of a bad cause could betray men of sense into most palpable absurdities? After no decent objection could be urged against Mr Millar, upstarts a man to tell me, that he won't vote for him, because he has not passed his grand climacteric. Another also refuses, because Mr  
 Millar



Millar has been but lately inrolled a citizen, and has not yet opened an alum-shop, and hired a clerk to whistle in it. A third, perhaps, more sincere than his brethren, extols the immense wealth of his patron, and alludes to the small probability there is that Mr Millar ever shall equal it, unless it were possible for him to acquire the princely fortune of a German commissary, and retain the same unspotted reputation which he now enjoys. The next in order rises up, at a full council-board, to deliver a most elaborate harangue against the whole faculty of advocates, in order to prove that he would himself make a representative for the town vastly preferable to Mr Millar. And, that the farce might not be left incomplete, a recruit of the party drove down post from London, to tell the whole world that he has the virtue to vote for Sir Laurence Dundas, although a friend of government asked his support.

Was there ever before such a burlesque put upon the common sense of mankind? Are these arguments fit to mislead children? Yet most men, when they commit a fault which they are ashamed or afraid to avow, take care to conceal it under some very plausible pretence. But here there is not even the common merit of plausibility. No advocate of the party has ever attempted to vindicate their conduct upon rational ground. No adherent of Sir Laurence's has ever ventured to assert that he had either more virtue, or greater abilities, than Mr Millar, and that he, therefore, was entitled to the preference, and deserved our favour, on account of his merit; and as to his liberalities to the metropolis, during the fourteen years for which he has been their representative in parliament, which his friends celebrate as so bountiful, let it be remembered, that not a single article of his munificence stands upon record; so that we derive but little advantage from his immense fortune.

But, perhaps, my friends, you are now all persuaded, that, if the merchant-counsellors were placed more under the controul of their fellow citizens, their conduct would be more irreprehensible. I entertain no doubt of it myself. The hope of reward, and the fear of punishment, are the best preservatives against imprudence. Were the counsellors all chosen by the citizens, they would strive to ingratiate themselves with their electors, by the irreproachable tenor of their conduct. All would then have only one end in view, to promote the welfare of the town, by their own exertions in its favour. Excellence would alone be the road to illustration; and the public affairs of the town could not fail to flourish, when so many men were solicitous to gain ascendance by honourable means. No rich nabob

Nabob durst then presume to disturb our tranquillity, by sowing dissensions among us. It never would be in his power to tyrannize over us by the intrigues of a cabal, in opposition to the general sense of the people; because then the voice of the people would animate our public councils. Harmony would prevail between the magistrates and the citizens; because none but those who possessed the confidence of the people would be elected into office. All animosities between the members of the council themselves would, from that moment, cease; for men never disagree when they are intent solely upon the administration of justice. The adoption of this plan will for ever secure our independence, reconcile all our differences; and I might venture to prophecy, that, after it has been allowed time to produce its full operation, it will be productive of all that unanimity and good correspondence which every true lover of his country wishes to see permanently established among all the members of the town-council.

Edinburgh, Sept. 26.  
1786.

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